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ABSTRACT

In the early 1990s, Australian policymakers began explicitly promoting increased use of flexible delivery in vocational education and training (VET). Some researchers argued that many students lack the learning skills required to deal with the unique demands of flexible delivery. Concerns were also raised about the VET sector's capacity to help students develop needed cognitive and metacognitive skills. A review of the literature revealed wide agreement that students' success in flexible delivery and open and distance education in Australia and elsewhere is generally determined by a complex interplay of factors, including the following: readiness for self-directed learning; ability to balance the time demands of study with other commitments such as family and work; level of literacy; ability to understand and deal with assessment requirements; level of motivation; and previous educational experiences. Two case studies based on the actual experiences of two of six students interviewed about their experiences in flexible VET delivery were reviewed. Both students decided to withdraw from their VET course because of several interconnected factors that built up over time. Both cases illustrated that some problems that can be addressed quickly in face-to-face learning environments are much more difficult to resolve when students are off campus. (Contains 23 references.) (MN)

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Barriers to learners' successful completion of VET flexible delivery programs

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In the early 1990s, Australian government policy made an explicit shift towards promoting increased flexible delivery in vocational education and training (VET) as an integral part of the National Training Reform Agenda (Flexible Delivery Working Party 1992, p 9). Since then, government policy has increasingly encouraged training organisations in the VET sector to adopt flexible delivery approaches. Other stakeholders in the VET sector, such as employers and Industry Training Advisory Boards, have also embraced flexible delivery (Evans and Smith 1999).

Amongst the official enthusiasm for the increased use of flexible delivery, some researchers sounded a note of caution. Misko (1994, p 12) challenged some of the assumptions made about flexible delivery, and expressed concern about moving too quickly to a system that placed increased responsibility onto learners who may not be ready for it. Warner et al (1998, pp 4-8) reported that over 70% of learners in the Australian VET sector lacked the learning capabilities required by flexible delivery. Smith (2000, p 43) tested the learning preferences of 1,252 VET learners and concluded that:

> ... VET learners are not typically well-equipped for flexible delivery. They exhibit a low preference for self-directed learning, and a low preference for learning that does not include experience with the equipment, tools or processes to be used in the task being learned.

Boote (1998, p 81) reported doubts about whether self-direction and metacognitive skills were being promoted in VET programs, stating instead that:

> ... there appears to be some degree of assumption that both self-direction and metacognitive skills are already existing characteristics of adult VET learners, or that these outcomes will happen as part of existing VET provision.

Cornford (2000) argued that many TAFE students lacked the learning skills required to deal with tightly focused modular courses and pressures to complete in a limited timeframe. But he also raised questions about the capacity of the VET sector to address this need. Cognitive and metacognitive skills need to be developed over a period of time, and many VET courses are short term. Cornford also argued that many practitioners in the VET sector did not have sufficient understanding of cognitive and metacognitive skills to be able to teach these skills effectively.

Misko (1994) identified a need for Australian research into learning outcomes for various modes of delivery. A research project conducted by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (Misko 1999; Misko 2000) compared student outcomes by delivery mode for all modules undertaken by VET students in 1997. The study reported that students studying by *external/correspondence* and *self-paced*

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unscheduled delivery modes had higher non-completion rates and lower pass rates than students studying by other delivery strategies (Misko 1999).

The qualitative data reported in this study was drawn from a survey of students who had successfully completed their studies (Misko 1999; Misko 2000). Misko noted 'Although this data can provide us with some good information ... it does not provide the whole picture' (1999, p 13). Similarly, the students who participated in the qualitative component of the study reported by Warner et al (1998) were those who were enrolled in VET courses, or had completed their studies. There are real practical difficulties in obtaining information from former students who have failed or withdrawn from their studies. One of the respondents in the study by Warner et al (1998, p 51) commented:

> ... one of the major issues is level of drop-out and you can only ask the people who complete the course, you can't ask the drop-outs. Very very few studies, none to my knowledge, actually do follow-ups on people who don't complete.

Possible explanations for high attrition and failure rates may be found in the wide body of literature addressing flexible delivery and open and distance education in Australia and overseas. This literature has identified many specific factors that contribute to the success or otherwise of adult learners, particularly those participating in flexible delivery. Some of these factors include:

- The student's readiness for self-directed learning (Boote 1998; Calder and McCollum 1998; Cornford 2000; Misko 1994; Smith 2000; Warner et al 1998).
- Their ability to balance the time demands of study with other commitments such as family and work (Evans 1994; McAlister 1998; Thorpe 1987; Toussaint 1990).
- Whether the student has the literacy levels required to succeed in resource-based learning (Misko 1994). In some cases, the issue may not be one of literacy as much as familiarity with the language used within their field of study (Northedge 1987).
- The student's ability to understand and deal with assessment requirements (Cheung 1998; Grugeon 1987; McAlister 1998; Northedge 1987).
- The student's level of motivation (Misko 1994; Toussaint 1990), which is especially important to the success of those studying voluntarily (Thorpe 1987).
- In some cases, an adult learner's previous educational experiences can influence whether he/she succeeds when returning to education in later years (Evans 1994; Thorpe 1987).

Overall, there seems to be wide agreement that in most cases success is not determined by a single factor, but by the 'complex interplay of the issues involved in (a) student's decision to withdraw' (McAlister 1998, p 287). Participation in education as an adult involves both positive and negative aspects (Evans 1994; Northedge 1987;

Woodley 1987). Decisions to withdraw are made when the sum of the negative aspects of the educational experience outweigh the sum of the positive aspects (Woodley 1987).

As a practitioner in the VET sector, I hear the stories that my students tell about their experiences with flexible delivery. I believe that there is much in these stories that can help us understand the phenomenon of low pass rates and high attrition rates in some modes of educational delivery. But when I read the literature available to me, the voices of these students do not come through and their stories do not appear.

When I read, for example, that a sample of 28,840 module enrolments in computing courses by *external/correspondence* delivery mode achieved a module pass rate of only 44.2% (Misko 2000, pp 4-6), I acknowledge that I am interested in the students who passed and how they achieved it – but what I *really* want to know is what happened to the students represented by the remaining figure of 55.8%.

Method

What kind of research is needed? Woodley (1987, pp 66-67) argued that:

> If we are to arrive at a more complete understanding of why an individual drops out, it seems that we must move beyond the usual 'check list' approach. We must take into account what participation means to an individual and the total context in which he or she is studying. We must treat dropping out as a complex process in that it generally involves numerous inter-connected causal factors and often builds up over time.

Such understanding and awareness can be provided through case study methodology:

> A case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved (Merriam 1998, p 19).

McAlister (1998, p 287) has used case study methodology to provide:

> ... an account of both personal experience of distance study and a decision-making process about drop-out that is rarely accessible in larger quantitative studies.

Evans (1994, p 16) stated that students' stories can provide 'an insight into the main aspects of students' contexts which are often invisible to open and distance educators'.

This was the rationale underpinning my research project. I interviewed six adults who enrolled in flexible delivery VET courses but who did not achieve a successful outcome at their first attempt. The intention was not to conduct extensive research that would support broad generalisations about students who do not succeed in this mode of delivery. Rather, the intention was to study the complexity of each individual case, working towards an understanding of the diverse range of factors that together contributed to each of these students not successfully completing their course. This paper presents two case studies, based on the actual experiences of students who participated in my research.

Keryn's story

Keryn returned to study because she felt that her employer had begun to value qualifications more highly than practical experience.

> I wanted to get some qualifications to put myself back up in the league.

Flexible delivery enabled her to fit study around her work and family obligations:

> There's no other option when I have three kids and work night shift – short of putting the kids into day care, and I didn't want to do that. Flexible delivery was brilliant ... I could work out when I wanted to do it.

She liked the idea of being able to study at her own pace and at times convenient to her.

> I've developed very good time management skills, that's why I started the study in the first place. ... I could see the time frames. I knew that I'd have a couple of hours a week to apply to study

Keryn initially enrolled in two units. She particularly enjoyed these units, as the content was new and relevant and she found the assessment tasks meaningful.

> The first two units were exactly it. The units were so relevant to the issues at work. ... I had lots of examples to use from my workplace, and I was able to use my workplace as a case study for my assignment. I was also able to take what I learned in the course back to work and put in ideas and suggestions.

Shortly after Keryn enrolled, her mother was diagnosed with a terminal illness. In addition to her other responsibilities, Keryn provided care for her mother in the final months of life. Despite all that she had to cope with, Keryn successfully completed the first two units of her course. She enrolled in a further three units, but did not find these as enjoyable as the first two. The units she was now studying:

> ... seemed to go over things I'm already doing every day. I understand why those things are in the course. ... But the frustrating thing was that I'd already done a lot of this stuff. I'd been working with it and training other staff on the job for 10 years, so the enthusiasm wasn't over zealous.

Lack of interest in the course content was not the only issue for Keryn. She also experienced difficulty understanding assignment instructions.

> The instructions in some units were very vague, and it was difficult to be sure how much to write into it and how involved to get.

Cheung (1998) argued that students may not be motivated to complete assignment work if there is a feeling that it is not contributing to their understanding of the subject. Keryn was caught in a dilemma. She was confident of her ability to demonstrate competence, so she did not want to submit work that she felt was below standard. But she wasn't sure she had understood the assignment instructions. In the end, she completed most of the assignment tasks but did not submit her work for

assessment. She was concerned that getting a 'fail' result would be a 'black mark' on her student record.

Keryn's extensive work experience would appear to make her a good candidate for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Despite her skills and experience, Keryn did not apply for RPL for any of the units she was enrolled in:

> I would consider it, but you have to pay to apply for RPL for each unit, and there's something like 30 units. You have to pay about $65 or something per unit to apply for RPL – if you're applying for about a third of the units, that's a lot of money ... The cost to apply for RPL is more than the cost of doing the subject.

The RPL information booklet provided by Keryn's college suggests that her understanding of the fee structure was not correct. This is a key issue in Keryn's story, and a significant point for VET organisations offering courses through flexible delivery. It is not enough for training organisations to simply have RPL available. They also need to have strategies in place that make it accessible to students on a practical level, and this may be particularly important in flexible delivery. A student's level of motivation can be a significant factor in determining success (Misko 1994; Woodley 1987). That motivation can be supported by making the course content interesting (Woodley 1987) and by showing the student that they are making progress (Calder and McCollum 1998; Grugeon 1987). When students have extensive industry experience and can demonstrate the required competence, RPL can help maintain their interest by offering an alternative to studying material that is already known. It can also help them make progress by giving credit for existing skills.

Keryn's enthusiasm for the course was already declining. When her young daughter was diagnosed with a serious medical condition, Keryn reviewed her commitments and decided that she did not have the time to continue with her study. Rather than risk failing, Keryn withdrew from the three units she was enrolled in.

> We got a few extra things thrown into life. ... I just had to look at it and say that I can't quite do all this, what can we cut out of the picture?

Keryn valued education and enjoyed flexible delivery, yet she withdrew from a course that was apparently at a level that should have been well within her ability. Evans (1994, p 28) argued that:

> ... learners can be remarkably resilient about their pursuit of education ... (but)... they are not very resilient about education that they don't like.

On a positive note, Keryn described flexible delivery as 'brilliant'. She indicated that when her other time demands had settled down and she returned to study, she would again choose flexible delivery mode, but she also appeared to be developing a more strategic approach. She was able to confidently articulate what she would do differently next time.

> I'd get more information about the specific units. And then I'd go to RPL and see what I could cross off the list – then look at what's left.

Craig's Story

At 22 years of age Craig found himself working in two 'dead-end' jobs, so he decided to study towards what he described as a 'real' career in the primary industry sector.

Craig saw a newspaper advertisement for a TAFE course that looked relevant to his interests, and he contacted the course facilitator.

> (The facilitator) made flexible delivery sound enticing – I could do study in my own time. So I joined.

Craig wasn't sure what he was expecting flexible delivery to be like:

> I hated High School – detested it. You force yourself to study. I thought that if it was something you wanted to do, it would be different.

An initial misunderstanding saw Craig enrol in the equivalent of full-time study, attempting fourteen units in addition to his two jobs. This had a negative impact on his motivation to study.

> I worked out that I'd have to do an assignment every couple of days ... I was thinking 'I'm not ever going to get this finished, so what's the point in starting it?'

While participating in a series of on-campus study skills workshops, Craig realised that he was the only student attempting this workload. He spoke to the facilitator, and his workload was substantially reduced, but he still found it difficult to settle into an effective study pattern.

> I just didn't like study. I found every type of excuse to not study.

At the study skills workshop Craig completed a learning styles activity.

> It came out strongly in my learning style: I'm hands-on. I prefer to get out and do stuff, not sit in a classroom and read.

The content of Craig's course related to practical skills, but the delivery mode relied heavily on learning by reading. Research findings (Misko 1994; Smith 2000) have suggested that reading is not the preferred mode of instruction for many Australian VET students, and have questioned the capacity of flexible delivery to respond to the needs of individual learners if the delivery strategy relies heavily on text-based materials. In telling his story, Craig repeatedly talked about the difficulties he experienced.

> I'm a hands-on person, but the subject I'm studying doesn't allow for it ... Even though I'm a hands-on person, there is no give and take in how I learn, because it's all in a book.

The learning materials did in fact incorporate practical activities in the form of suggested excursions and site visits. Craig was unable to benefit from these activities because his learning materials were imported from another state. The recommended sites were not accessible, and Craig's college did not suggest alternative local sites.

Evans (1994) has argued that open and distance education can be structured in a way that gives students control over decisions about when and where to study, but leaves them with 'little option but to adhere to the curriculum ... and its required learning styles' (Evans 1994, p 68). This appears to be the situation in which Craig found himself.

> I got the impression that flexible learning was time flexible, not the way they taught you flexible. (The facilitator) was always saying 'You can do the course in 6 months or in 10 years' – but he never talked about the *way* you could do it.

Misko (1994, p 42) considered the variables involved in customising instruction to accommodate individuals, and concluded that:

> The complexity of the task may in fact lead instructors and administrators to the conclusion that structuring learning activities to suit the individual learning styles of students may be more trouble than it is worth.

Craig made a similar observation, using different language.

> There are hundreds of ways that people can learn, but one college can't accommodate all of them. It's just a waste of resources.

If structuring courses so that they have the flexibility to respond to the learning styles of individual students is not always a practical option, what is the alternative? One approach is to provide students with training to help them develop the skills they need (Boote 1998; Smith 2000). The study skills workshops that Craig had attended helped students to recognise their learning preferences, but did not provide students with learning strategies.

> It was 'This is what you are, now you go and learn something from it'. There was nothing specifically for individual students on this is how you should be learning.

'Learning-to-learn' activities need to help learners develop strategies they can use to progress in their studies. Northedge (1987) proposed that students be encouraged to reflect on their own progress and their current study techniques, and explore new approaches and practices. Smith (2000, p 42) noted that:

> ... it is inevitable that a certain amount of learning materials and resources that VET learners need to engage with will be textually presented.

Smith argued that VET learners would benefit from programs that would help them develop strategies to engage effectively with text-based materials such as manuals, workplace policies and technical magazines.

In Craig's case, the study skills workshops helped him to develop a new awareness of his own preferred learning style.

> It was an eye-opener – it makes you think ... I realise that I learn better practically.

But rather than helping him develop strategies to succeed in his course, this new awareness eventually provided a justification for Craig's decision to withdraw from the course and look for something different.

> I'm just going to let it go. It isn't the style I like to learn in ... This course is just not leading me in the direction I want to go.

Comments/discussion

For both Keryn and Craig the decision to withdraw from their course was not attributable to a single factor, but was the result of several interconnected factors that built up over time. Both stories illustrate how some problems that can be quickly addressed in a face-to-face environment are much more difficult to resolve when the student is off-campus. Had Keryn been in a class complaining that she had 'already done a lot of this stuff', the result may have been some discussion of RPL or 'fast-tracked' assessment. Had Craig been handed a timetable that showed class sessions that clashed with his work hours, one would have expected him to get a fairly immediate reaction. But both students were working at home, and neither approached staff at their institution to discuss the problems they were experiencing. This is consistent with the evidence from the literature that many students studying by flexible delivery are reluctant to contact institution staff until an issue has developed into a major problem (Fage 1987; McAlister 1998; Murphy and Yum 1998). By then, of course, it may be too late.

Woodley argued that 'today's 'open' and 'distance learning' schemes are obliged to take the matter of student progress very seriously' (Woodley 1987, p 54). Warner et al (1998, p 11) have stated that course providers [illegible] responsibility for addressing the high attrition rates in flexibly delivered courses.

Since 1995 the Australian National Training Authority has worked to:

> ... make the flexible delivery of vocational education and training a reality for all Australian learners. (EDNA VET Advisory Group 2000, p 7)

An important part of achieving this outcome is to develop a deep understanding of the students, their circumstances, and the barriers that many learners encounter in their attempts to successfully complete VET flexible delivery programs.

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